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ABSTRACT

Issues in the ongoing evaluation of an innovative curriculum in an academic setting are discussed. The program provides instruction in computer literacy to a physically challenged clientele and to professionals from local service agencies who have disabilities. Data have been collected through survey questionnaires principally composed of Likert items and direct or telephone interviews. Both interviews deal with: (1) likes and dislikes of participants; (2) desired changes; (3) perception of effects on individual improvement; and (4) demographics/client background data. The foremost problem has been that of unintentional alienation of subjects due to semantics in talking about disabilities. Face-to-face interviews with visually impaired subjects brought different problems in terms of potential bias. Confidentiality is a problem transcending all types of evaluation instrumentation. Another important issue has been the utilization of the evaluation's findings. The evaluation of the first year was summative; it served as the basis for formative changes for subsequent years. Strategies for the successful conduct of this summative evaluation with formative purposes must take the acknowledged problems into account. Evaluating a program for special needs groups may require special preparation and sensitivity. (SLD)

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Evaluation Instruments and the Physically Challenged Subjects: Problems, Issues, and Strategies

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EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS AND PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED SUBJECTS: PROBLEMS, ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

INTRODUCTION

In order for program evaluation to effectively render a judgment of merit or worth (Madaus, Scriven and Stufflebeam, 1988), it is important that strategic planning is focused on the situation being evaluated. Unique challenges are encountered in working with those programs which purport to serve the special needs of physically challenged populations. Evaluators face a continual learning process in striving to meet whatever standards of effective evaluation they are aiming for. The authors believe that relevant experiences should be shared in the evaluation community to render a more realistic and responsive range of measurement techniques.

The basis for this paper will be the ongoing evaluation of an innovative curriculum program in an academic setting. This program provides instruction in computer literacy to both a physically challenged clientele and disability professionals from local service agencies. It is the measurement of the affective data sought from the challenged population that has provided the impetus for this line of reasoning.

FOCUS

Throughout the evaluation, data has been collected from program participants using both survey questionnaires (in a pretest-posttest non-randomized design) as well as direct or telephone interviews. The survey instrument has been piloted

before each annual use. The evaluation is now in its second year; it ideally has a different set of respondents or a new class section in every semester. Although validity may tend to be subjective (House, 1978) when dealing with affective data, it continues to be a concern of the evaluation team.

Survey questions consist principally of Likert items using a seven point semantic differential scale for various key issues. There are also a number of open ended opinion questions, many of which were added for the second (this current) year of the project based on perceived needs uncovered during year one. Interview questions can be open ended or may seek the classic yes/no answer. At any rate, they have sought to employ a conversational tone based on the evaluators' cognizance of the value of multiple perspectives (Madaus, Scriven, Stufflebeam, 1988). Like most evaluations, there are a core group of anticipated or desired outcomes, especially on the part of the sponsor. The evaluation team has done its best to avoid getting caught up in this phenomenon. It is, however, tied in somewhat unavoidably to the content of the instruments in question. This is primarily due to the fact that program standards are based on a grant proposal written by the sponsor well before this evaluation. The program's funding is by and large external.

This emphasis is implicit in most of the survey and interview questions as they deal with: a) the main likes and dislikes of participants about the program; b) desired changes; and, c) perception of course effect on individual improvement(s).

Aside from these broad conceptual areas, the bulk of remaining questions asked deal with demographics or client background data.

PROBLEMS / ANALYSIS

In administering the written survey instrument to the designated sample of physically challenged subjects, the foremost problem was that of unintentional alienation due to semantics. This alienation can be subtle , yet it can pose a barrier to the essential level of rapport between evaluator and respondent. For example, one question asked for a description of the applicable "disability." In retrospect, we see a low response rate and little utility to the question. And, of those who did respond, some simply indicated that they are not "disabled."

Clearly the problem here is with the use of terminology. The very word "disabled" may border on being offensive to some of the clients. To others it simply does not apply; the feeling is that they are indeed "able" to attack their circumstances by a strategy such as this course (Horne, 1988). It is not only important to establish a viable common language (Converse and Presser, 1986) but also to make that language acceptable and non-alienating.

Comprehensibility of certain items can also be problematic. In developing Likert scale items, it is necessary to give specific and understandable values to each point as well as a concise and explicit set of instructions at the start. Even if this may seem redundant to the evaluator, it must be remembered that the physically challenged person may have a constant struggle with such dilemmas. This may be especially true for

people with a reading or perceptual problem. If the preservation of conceptual clarity is among the investigator's most difficult challenges (Converse and Presser, 1986), then the degree of difficulty is multiplied when trying to accommodate special needs. Similarly, length of the questions and the overall questionnaire can adversely effect the data yield by discouraging completion. Though the importance of brevity in this type of activity was pointed out by Payne some time ago (Converse, Presser, 1989), this issue is accentuated for those who have difficulty in writing.

Face to face interviewing using the same survey questions as those on the written questionnaire was necessitated in the cases of visually impaired subjects. A different set of problems arose here in terms of potential bias. It is extremely important for the individual reading the questions to avoid using excessive voice inflection or expository wording. Time constraints within the interview format are a concern, especially in reconciling them with the individual subject's needs for patience and a time frame that allows for realistic open ended responses. Without a doubt, these factors were part of the initial decision to use oral questioning only when dictated by the situation. The time element and interviewer influence have often been cited as being counterproductive (Henerson, Morris and Fitz-Gibbon, 1987).

Yet another problem that transcends all types of instrumentation is that of confidentiality. Responses that are given anonymously increase the chances of getting data that generally represents the affective domain of the respondent

(Henerson, Morris and Fitz-Gibbon, 1987). While subjects for any survey, regardless of physical capacities, are prone to value confidence, this is accentuated with the challenged population. Evaluators need to remember that this population has often experienced a very insensitive side of society. Any instrument failing to address confidentiality runs the risk of receiving limited or low-quality yields of information, thus impeding the utility of the entire project.

ISSUES.

To describe a recipient of special services as a person with a disability is not the same as describing him/her as a disabled person. A "disability" is limited to certain activities; disabled as an adjective implies general inability (Horne, 1988). A blind person may have a disability in painting a landscape, but with a Braille keyboard may be a better than average computer operator. To describe this person as disabled or handicapped is doing the person an injustice (Horne, 1988). If the person is not even limitedly disabled by the deficient physical condition described as a disability, can it still be called a disability? Conceivably, with today's technology and awareness of certain disabilities the answer may be "no". Should we call such a person "physically challenged" or "exceptional" as suggested by Horne (1988)? Maybe not if the physical challenge has been met and conquered. In response to an open ended question on our survey, respondents did not object to the term "disability" even when used in the general sense. However, an interviewee objected to being described as having a disability. This subject might

still object to the more empathetic terms "physically challenged" or "exceptional" if sincerely self sufficient and truly not needing extra services.

Another important issue in our evaluation was the utilization of the evaluation's findings. Because the sponsor was following a grant proposal written before any original contact with the evaluators, the evaluation had to be described as summative. Our question was: how summative would an evaluation of the first year of a five year program actually be? It was rather clear from the start that anything learned from the evaluation of the first year would be implemented into the ever-developing program.

For a sponsor who needs an evaluation to satisfy the conditions of a grant proposal, summative merit would be the appropriate choice in most cases. Summative merit as defined by Guba and Lincoln "is concerned with assessing the intrinsic value of some evaluand with the intent of determining whether it meets some minimal... standard ...its internal design specifications" (Guba and Lincoln 1989). The grant proposal promises to follow some standards or guidelines and the evaluation of the program answers how closely it does. It is natural for a grant proposal to describe the evaluation of the proposed project in this way; however once the project is under way it would be folly to allow inadequacies in the program plan to go unaltered on their way to fruition if these inadequacies are pointed out through the evaluation.

There are reasons, such as those related to reliability, why an evaluator may want to save data until the end of the evaluation. However, there are considerations such as the rights of human subjects as outlined in the Standards of the Joint Committee. Denying treatment when it is clearly needed by the study's subjects could be considered a violation. If a large group (such as the program recipients of a full year) is refused access to the improvements of the program, professional ethics would insist on the evaluator suggesting the formative improvement before the end of the evaluation. This consideration alone would not change the focus of the evaluation from summative to formative (Guba and Lincoln). However, a new slant is given when the sponsor requests immediate feedback from every evaluation activity so data can be used at once to improve the program.

Any evaluator could encounter any one of these situations. Many probably know their summative evaluation of one year is going to be used as justification for formative changes in the next year. Often there are program design flaws that need to be pointed out and changed right away. Surely, we are not the only evaluators whose sponsor has called for summative evaluation, but needed formative. It was the encountering of all three situations at once that prompts us to call for new terminology to explain summative evaluation used for formative purposes. This is a support for Stake's opinion that the distinction between formative and summative is "trivial" (Worthen and Sanders,1988). The relation of this dilemma to our instrumentation is an

operational as well as an ethical one. Evaluators must carefully consider the potential future role of formative data, up front, when developing instrumentation. In special needs scenarios, it will be a factor even when not overtly articulated.

STRATEGIES.

If a survey instrument intended for confidential response has to be administered orally, certain procedures could minimize the loss of confidentiality. During the first year of the evaluation project, it was discovered that, given a choice, most physically challenged subjects would prefer a more anonymous, telephonic interview. That principle, we suspect, may be generalizable to all people in an overall sense. In administering a telephonic interview, the interviewer is challenged to hold the interest of the respondent and to make smooth transitions between questions. It must be kept in mind that telephone conversations can also be laborious for the physically challenged subject and that the subject would not really be anonymous (since he/she could easily be identified), However, the perception of anonymity on the part of the subject would probably decrease anxiety and increase the spontaneity of responses. By allowing this less stressful option and by minimizing evidence of the respondent's identity, the evaluator has made a reasonable, professional effort to assure confidentiality, as outlined in the Standards of the Joint Committee (1981). One final note about this strategy is that it is only usable if it meets the needs for data input as delineated

by the sponsor-evaluator negotiations. Hence, it has not always been feasible in our case.

When the situation does not allow alternative settings for administration, strategies would need to involve a sensitivity to the subjects' possible anxiety. The findings of Douglas Fuchs on the importance of familiarity of test taker with test administrator can be generalized to the administration of survey instruments. When the administration of the test diminishes confidentiality, the reliability of the data collected can be enhanced if the administrator takes time to develop rapport with the subject. Another strategy to glean reliable data from surveys of affective responses administered orally is to assure the subject repeatedly that he/she does not need to answer any question perceived to be inappropriate or intrusive (Standards, 1981).

In answering the problem posed by describing collectively the needs of the clients of the program, a strategy to diminish the sensitivity of certain terms needs to be developed. A review of the literature in the areas of exceptionality and disabilities would yield some suggestions of empathetic terms and the rationale for accepting or rejecting certain terms. Particular note should be repeated that a "person with a disability" (even from only a semantical point of view) is not a "disabled person" (Horne, 1988) This is such a sensitive point that in some cases "disability" is rejected as a term in order to not imply the more comprehensive term "disabled" (Horne, 1988). Our strategy to address this problem was to include in our questionnaire an open

ended question allowing the subjects to rename the program. We presumed the subjects would eliminate any objectionable terminology. As noted earlier, clarity and length of items (and overall instruments) can be problematic. This boils down to evaluators' advance awareness of these items so that proper planning will eliminate later anxiety and stimulate more applicable results.

SUMMARY

In our study and experience we did not develop any "cookbook" strategies for dealing with all the identified problems. Nor was the discussion of the issues exhaustive. We hope though that professional discussion can lead to thorough analysis of the unique concerns (problems, issues and strategies) involved in evaluating special needs programs.

Sensitivity to the problems of the sponsor, sensitivity to the situation of the program's recipients, sensitivity to the cultural pride of the special needs population are a significant part of the evaluation of the special need program. This sensitivity almost needs to be innate or intuitive, but with effort can be developed by those who want to. There is much literature available to help such training in sensitivity.

Special needs programs have a language, agendas, teaching methods that mainstream programs do not. The situations of the special needs program can be (and often are) perceived as contrary to usual educational prototypes. It is not stretching the point too far if we apply this understanding to the special needs program evaluation. In this paper we have touched upon

some of the areas where the aims and standards of the evaluator may be challenged. Our purpose has been to urge caution to the evaluator when treading this thin ice.

Some of the issues we have raised may be settled (or not even experienced) by the evaluator who has done his/her homework, the prior ethnology. As mentioned before by researching the field of educational special needs an evaluator may sensitize oneself to the situation of the program being evaluated. Furthermore, this sensitivity and familiarity with special needs program should lead the evaluator to recognize right away the strengths and needs of the program being evaluated by resemblance to established models.

In conclusion, two points we probably all learned in kindergarten would help us through the issues and problems presented here. The first is: if you don't know, ask. Through the established networks of the evaluation community there should be someone with the solution to any encountered problem. If not then that problem could be the basis for more research.

The second point is: if it works assume nothing is wrong. Do the evaluation the best you can, reporting to the sponsor any cause for concern. If the sponsor can use the evaluation's results and conclusions then it can be assumed to be a valid study. No one can argue with success.

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